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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 001473

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: EAP DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY JOHN'S MEETING WITH  
DEMOCRAT PARTY DEPUTY LEADER SURIN

Classified By: AMBASSADOR RALPH BOYCE. REASON 1.4(D)

11. (C) Summary: During a March 8 meeting with EAP Deputy Assistant Secretary John and the Ambassador, Democrat Party Deputy Leader and former Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan voiced his hope that the Palace would convince Prime Minister Thaksin to step down. He acknowledged, however, that the King would likely be reluctant to oust a populist leader elected by a large majority of the populace. Surin said that the DP is mounting a series of rallies around Thailand to encourage the electorate to check "no vote" on their ballots in next month's elections. He claimed that Thaksin's TRT party is busily paying individuals to oppose it under the banner of small inconsequential parties in order to give the appearance of a real electoral contest. End summary.

12. (C) Democrat Party Deputy Leader and former Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan met with EAP DAS John on March 8, just prior to his leaving for a series of rallies around Thailand to encourage the electorate to check "no vote" on their ballots in next month's elections. Surin said that DP leaders are explaining to voters throughout Thailand their party's rationale for refusing participation in the polls. Surin claimed that the election would be rigged and that the DP did not want to legitimize an essentially "dirty process." He added that in the absence of the DP running, the TRT is paying individuals to oppose it under the banner of small inconsequential parties and busily forging the paperwork to allow the ersatz candidates to meet residential, educational and time-in-party requirements. In his district in Nakhon Si Thammarat, said Surin, the TRT had offered 1 million baht to a local candidate to run against it, but the potential recruit was holding out for three million. (Note: registration of candidates concluded on March 8 afternoon.)

13. (C) DAS John noted that the Shin Corp sale appears to have been a tipping point, but that Thaksin has not actually been caught out committing a blatantly illegal action -- so why the boycott and clamor for his resignation? Surin responded that Thaksin's "sin" has been a consistent evasion of the law and misuse of authority. He and his regime have undermined and manipulated all of the country's supervisory mechanisms -- the Security and Exchange Commission, the Constitutional Court, the Election Commission, the Tax Department, etc. Thaksin has been "too good" at manipulating small weaknesses in a generally good -- though in need of some adjustment -- constitution, Surin said. Even the nominally independent courts are suborned by Thaksin through bribery. In addition, Thaksin controlled the electronic media and much of the print media, Surin complained. Why participate when the system will be manipulated against you? Surin concluded.

14. (C) Surin acknowledged international criticism of the DP's decision to boycott the April polls. DAS John asked how he would address critics who say that the DP is a "spoilsport" that, cognizant that the Prime Minister would win in a new election, will try to bring him down by other means. Surin responded that the political and governmental system itself has gone bad under Thaksin -- constitutional controls have been undermined by the Prime Minister and electoral watchdog bodies compromised.

15. (C) The Ambassador raised the seeming divide between Thaksin's political base in north and northeast Thailand on the one hand and Bangkok on the other. Surin said that the average low income worker or farmer in populous Isaan (northeast) Thailand is "not interested" and does not want to know about the crisis that Thaksin has created by his abuse of power. "It is the educated in Bangkok and the elite" who are carrying the struggle, he added.

16. (C) When DAS John asked where he thought the situation was going, Surin said that he hoped that someone such as Privy Council Chairman General Prem Tinsulanonda would be able to weigh in with the Palace's authority to persuade Thaksin to go for the sake of the country's stability. He opined that otherwise Thaksin will not likely go without being pushed. If Article 7 comes into play, Surin said, the King could appoint a new Prime Minister and "fair and transparent" elections be scheduled. (Note: Article 7 stipulates that "Whenever no provision under this Constitution is applicable to any case, it shall be decided in accordance with the constitutional practice in the

democratic regime of government with the King as Head of the State.") The Ambassador asked if the DP had lines through to the Palace towards this eventuality. Surin said he thought not, but that the DP was "hopeful" that the Palace would decide "enough is enough" and tell Thaksin to go. (Note: On March 8 Privy Councillor and former Supreme Commander General Surayut Chulanont issued a call for a dialogue between Thaksin and his opposition.)

17. (C) Surin agreed with the Ambassador that the King would be reluctant to oust a populist leader elected by a large majority of the populace and still apparently enjoying great popularity outside of Bangkok and the DP's traditional stronghold in Thailand's south. The Palace would not want to appear to take sides in this contest between Thaksin and his enemies, he noted.

18. (C) Another variable in the ongoing situation is the upcoming celebration of the King's 60th anniversary of his accession to the throne, said Surin. He said that the results of the flawed elections may not be resolved by then and the Palace would be apprehensive over the celebrations taking place amid an atmosphere of national political uncertainty. The anti-Thaksin demonstrators under the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) umbrella would likely call for a break during the celebrations. The situation is "messy" with no "happy" options, Surin said. The Parliament cannot even be re-seated because the decree dissolving it had immediate effect. Thinking aloud, Surin added that Thaksin could have saved himself and the country considerable trouble if, rather than dissolve Parliament, he had resigned and appointed a malleable successor.

19. (C) The Ambassador noted that the DP has some dubious company on its side of the anti-Thaksin front -- Sondhi has a questionable business past and Chamlong is out of date and heads a strange cult of followers. Surin agreed and noted that the DP is avoiding the anti-Thaksin rallies sponsored by Sondhi and the PAD. Rather, DP representatives are participating in academic seminars on issues such as Thaksin's alleged stock manipulation and tax evasion.

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